FORMS OF DISAPPEARANCE AND LOSS

Raúl Zurita, INRI*, New York Review of Books, £9.99,*
ISBN 9781681372792
Tsvetanka Elenkova, Crookedness*, Shearsman, £9.95,*
ISBN 9781848616868
Yu Yoyo, My Tenantless Body*, Poetry Translation Centre, £7,*
ISBN 9780957551138

Theophilus Kwek on three collections in translation

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The initial occasion for Raúl Zurita's poem *INRI* – first published in 2003 and presented here in a magnificent translation by William Rowe – was an announcement by the Chilean President Ricardo Lagos in January 2001 confirming what was, by then, already widely known: that the bodies of thousands who had 'disappeared' under Pinochet's dictatorship would never be found again, as they had been "thrown out of airplanes into the sea and the mountains: into the Pacific Ocean and into the mouths of volcanoes". For Zurita, imprisoned in the hold of a ship when Allende's democratically elected Marxist government was first overthrown (with help from the United States), this admission brought neither surprise nor outrage; instead, what came to his lips was a long and insensible "screech", a cry of protest and deep, unmistakeable shame.

It is opportune for the *New York Review of Books* to have re-issued this

text, two decades on, at a time when calamity seems ever more commonplace. Where Lagos struggled to maintain some "pretense of solemnity in the face of sheer brutality", today's government officials might be more likely to deny uncomfortable truths outright, or revel in them. Inhuman acts are lost in our news cycle, making it doubly difficult to ascribe cause or responsibility, while global structures of accountability have fallen suspect. Amidst all this, *INRI* – comprising prose vignettes that make up a collection of scenes in three untitled segments – brings some sense of how we might confront the unspeakable with language, and in so doing, begin to show due "respect and acknowledgement" for those we have lost.

A first step in this direction, Zurita suggests, is to record our "acknowledgement and respect of the land". This is especially poignant because Pinochet's crimes have not only disfigured state and society, but the physical landscape as well. Over and over, the poet returns to the moment at which bodies fell out of the sky, covering the Chilean earth; an epochal moment – like manna falling in the desert – except it was death raining down, not life-giving bread: "Seas / Were thrown. Heavy with strange seed, / ploughed fields cover the sea". Elsewhere, he names the dead, who have now become inseparable from the land: "Mauricio, Odette, María, Rubén. Now they are hundreds of pink tombs on the gauze of the mountain". These lines, if grandiloquent, are more than eulogy; they pay homage, too, to a landscape that has been irreversibly altered "for the first time, since the beginning of the world".

Much of this recalls Zurita's earlier work. In her introduction, the poet Norma Cole describes some of Zurita's "transdisciplinary" installations which straddle land art and poetry, works that are at once "in process and timeless, boundless and intimate". One might see this as inscribing permanent beauty in the face of permanent loss, but truer to the poet's vision is perhaps a desire to exceed the mortal earth – the setting of so much brutality and death – by having poetry redeem it. *INRI* imagines a resurrection of the dead that also returns the world to its newness: "those thrown out over Chile placed their feet once more on the snow and the snow that received the weight of their new limbs creaked like the sea". None of this can undo past atrocities; as Rowe writes in his translator's note, "the wound to our common human existence persists, the disappeared dead are still dead". But Zurita achieves the next best thing: a tribute to the dead, and a reminder to the living of what might yet be salvaged.

Two other recent translations deal with quieter forms of disappearance and loss. Unlike Zurita, whose canvas is the oceans and seas, Bulgarian poet Tsvetanka Elenkova chooses to dwell on the fine print of the physical world: the echo from a conch, or the wind heard "through the open throat" of a bottle. These images, from her opening poem ('Pain'), give tender shape to what is otherwise hollow or invisible: "a single slight hiss / as of a punctured bicycle tyre", or "pain from the emptied body". She returns in later poems to chart the psychological experience of pain; the death of a friend, for instance, is compared with sitting "under the crown of a broad-leaved tree / which is an upturned conifer [...] to watch the coming storm" ('Hourglass'). The precision of Elenkova's images shines through (and even transcends) the clean, almost earnest diction of Jonathan Dunne's translation.

In a new introduction, Fiona Sampson describes Elenkova as a mystic of our times, her "lucid" observations bringing to light "a poetic world [...] of religious mystery, mortality, love and desire". Though *Crookedness* borrows liberally from tradition, the poet is quick to disclaim immediate parallels with Orthodox iconography: "Your body has nothing in common / with the cross", she writes (and adds – "or Leonardo / or the sun god", for good measure). What is at work here is not the stained-glass imagery of the church, but something plainer and still more sensuous: "an interweaving (of the ankles) / an open / eight / a curve (of the wrists)" ('This Is It'). Such earthy and abundant beauty carries with it always the hard edge of impermanence, unless, of course, it is transformed into poetry. As one of the briefest poems in the collection's second segment ('Pansies after Rain') puts it, "reflection is capture" (emphasis mine).

My Tenantless Body presents six poems by Sichuanese poet Yu Yoyo, whose work, published in two collections, has been widely anthologised and translated. That this slim collection affords only a tiny window on Yu's prolific output is redeemed by the fact that these pieces are among her most recent and diverse work, showcasing her poetic range in short, taboo-breaking poems as well as longer dream-sequences. For instance, the poem from which the volume's title is drawn (entitled 'dad') is a laconic repudiation of paternal authority and filial expectations, dressed convincingly as a millennial's rant: "dad / you can make me into a bed / be the ruler of me / mum doesn't know me / [...]". In a few deft lines, Yu takes apart the strictures of familial conventions in which the (male) heads of country, community and household can easily blur into one another.

On the other hand, her sequence 'sleepwalking' wanders impressionistically across a shifting topography, the sheer strangeness of which prevents the poem's flashes of emotional depth from coming across as trite: "you put / eight suns / ... / between yourself and danger // you want to go somewhere / the clouds dry faster".

At the core of Yu's vision is a kind of disappearance unlike that inflicted by tyranny (as in Zurita's work) or temporality (as in Elenkova's). One reads in Yu's pointed lines a disappearance of the poet herself; not only in her predominant idiom (a searching, imperative voice), but in her stark depiction of contemporary China's bleached cities and sullen interiors, with hardly any room left for the expressive first-person: "the people on TV / violating one another / while you just remain intact / and a little bored". Even where she addresses her audience directly, she urges us away from both extremes of contemporary urban life – desperate isolation and equally forceful intimacy – and places us at the still, empty heart of things: "fewer and fewer people in the city / gradually replaced // by an expanse of water". Here, at Yu's chosen vantage-point, there is only a looking out and no looking in: "you're like a pier / wrapped in sounds / of arrival and departure" ('empty town').

The three collections span, as it were, three worlds; three ways of seeing and speaking about disappearances that arise from vastly different imaginative geographies. Thanks to the fine work of their translators, we, as Anglophone readers – who so often stand at a comfortable remove from the immediate contexts of what we encounter on the page – can begin to inhabit these worlds, too.

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